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In the Gods' Shadow

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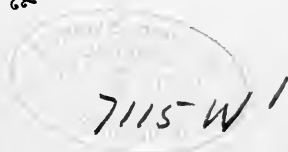


IN THE GODS' SHADOW

BY

GEORGE MACDONALD MAJOR

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“In the Gods’ Shadow” and “The Background of Mystery” have lain in my desk for the past three years. Some time I had expected leisure and inclination to revise them,—but upon re-perusal lately they seemed lacking in unity of construction or possibly are essentially unpoetical; at least I felt that I could not work out the idea I had in my own mind. It is probably folly to print what is unsatisfactory even to one’s self, but I could not consign them to oblivion without some little epitaph to mark their grave. The text for that epitaph will be culled from the critics.

January 25, 1891.

Argument.

GALLUS POLLIO, a Roman gentleman of eminent ancestry, having loved the lady JULIA, marries her and discards his mistress VISTILLIA. After three years the latter, discovering that JULIA has become a convert to the religion of Christ, betrays her to the pagan priests upon the occasion of the annual sacrifice and festival given by the Pollio family. This she does in the hope of regaining the affection of GALLUS, but only accomplishes thereby his death and her own.

Persons.

CHORUS OF PRIESTESSES.

CHIEF PRIEST.

PRIESTS.

GALLUS POLLIO.

JULIA, his wife.

VISTILLIA, formerly his mistress.

FLACCUS, brother to Vistillia.

NEIGHBORS in attendance, and BACCHANTES.

Invocation.

*A lady in imperious beauty vain
Reminds me ever of the partial Muse
Who scoffs his love who loves her most and sues
To be the humblest vassal in her train.
She scorns sobbed prayers and the incurable pain
Of burning, haunting thought, that vainly woos
Expression, since she does all aid refuse,
Or mocks with echoes of elusive strain.
What have I done that she should chase me thus —
At wakening Morn, still Noon and whispering
Eve ?
What unpurged crime, save loving her too well,
Thus to be doomed of song the Sisyphus,
Or Tantalus, when Hope has turned to leave ?
O Muse, grant just one song imperishable !
January 22, 1888.*



IN THE GODS' SHADOW.

A hill set apart for sacrificial purposes on grounds of Gallus Pollio. Chorus of priestesses and priests in attendance, and while the neighbors, dressed in holiday attire, are assembling, the action begins. Time — Morning.

Chorus of Priestesses.

First Priestess.

The day has arisen
In beauty and light ;
The sunshiny heaven,
The dew-beaded sods,
No shadows imprison,
No hint of the night.
As Nature were given
The smiles of the gods,

In the Gods' Shadow.

Beseeching whose favor
These holiday folk,
With worship and praises,
With offerings and gifts
Of incense and savor,
A blessing invoke.
Yet a veil o'er their faces
My spirit uplifts,
And low in their psalters
I hear a refrain,
A minor of sorrow,
A funereal lay,
A ghost at their altars
That prophesies pain,
A tragic to-morrow
To follow to-day !

Second Priestess.

Alas, alas, alas !
And art thou too possessed ?
All night I saw, as in a glass,
Foreboding specters pass, repass ;
And when I trod this haunted grass
A sudden terror filled my breast,
As if some lurking god impressed
My spirit to receive his dread behest.
Even now the shade of some sad doom impending,
Some dark, vague horror all-controlling,
O'er my seized soul is rolling ;

Visions strange my being rending,
Fire and ashes,
Like the flashes
Of Jove's anger with this morning worship blending!

First Priestess.

From what way comes this direly threatening fate?
A blast of what god's hate?

Second Priestess.

Ah me, who knows?
The wind that blows
Far from the wild Tyrrhenian caves swells forth.
Rain streaming from the east, cold shivering from
the north.
But who can resolve me the mystical meaning of
dreams,
Which with thick rushing phalanx my being sur-
rounds and o'er-teems
Like shadows of blackness that darken the mirrors
of sun-loving streams?
The mists of the day, and the clouds of the night,
Without form, without words,
Like a ghost making audible flight;
Or the whirr of a million dark wings that reveal not
the bodies of birds.
Yet the day is born
Of a perfect morn,

And the sights of the eye and the sounds of the ear
Full of rapture and cheer.

First Priestess.

The clearest blue sky
Has the thunderbolt nigh,
And the calmest sea
May the dreadest be ;
So marvel not

 If the day most fair
Brings the blackest lot
 And the night of care.

For the envious gods
Begrudge unto mortals
Long living untroubled,
But snare and entrap them,
And plague them with sorrow,
And visit the evil
Of long generations
On grandchildren's children ;
Nor prayers nor oblations
Preserve them from suffering.
The greater the virtue,
The grander the hero ;
The gods give them glory,
And pleasure, and riches,
But still overbalance
The scales of the blessing
With wanderings and troubles,

False wives and false friendships,
And dyings inglorious.
The brand of a woman,
The shaft of a coward,
May send down to Hades
The victor and taker
Of many walled cities.
This is of the gods,
 Who joy to see
Man's race in the toils
 Of Destiny.

Chorus of Priestesses.

Alas, that we should know
 The coming woe !
We virgin priestesses, that we
Should feel the awful pangs of prophecy !
 Alas ! they borrow
Who would know of the things to come but pain ;
 For increased knowledge is but added sorrow
And madness in the heart and in the brain.
But grant, great gods, this day marred in the
 making
May not to us bear wailing and heartbreaking.
 Forbid that we should sup
 Of this day's awful cup.

Priest.

Why do you roll your eyes and speak strange words ?

Chorus.

The future looms before us dark and dread.

Priest.

Is it for us or you the sights you see?

Chorus.

The god who sits upon our lips speaks not,
But vaguely hints of woe and grief to come.

Priest.

To-day, or on the far-off shores of Time?

Chorus.

The urgent motions in us point to-day.

Priest.

Look round and see — note where the clouds of fate
Are resting o'er devoted heads foredoomed.

Chorus.

Where Flaccus and Vistillia talk apart,
And walk this way, while in us gloom strange
 scenes
Shotted with angry lightnings of the gods.

Priest.

Then one or both some shaft of gods will smite.

Chorus.

We cannot say. The visions veer and change;
But let us finish now our preparation.

Flaccus.

Sister, she is not here, as I foretold.

Vistillia.

You have not looked ; you have but looked amiss.

Flaccus.

My lids are fain to close from too much light,
Peering in luminous eyes of white-souled women
To catch a glimpse of her in this assemblage.

Vistillia.

As easily find some inconspicuous star
When heaven's plains are studded with their host,
As single her by sweeping round your eye.

Flaccus.

Nay, by the gods, she were the fairest here,
Conspicuous as though she wore a crown —
Her eyes outflashing all the women round.

Vistillia.

In Love's sight perhaps blind from ideal light,
Choosing a candle to the fire-orbed sun.

Flaccus.

If ever I had loved that cloudless glance,
This were the hour of the unrisen sun,
That time of dawn not altogether dark,
Because the cold, faint light of morning stars
Blanches the backward turning face of Night,

Flitting to far-off shores, but yet not shining
With the full lustre of oncoming Day,
In that she was not foremost of them all.

Vistillia.

Grateful unto my ears must sound her praise.

Flaccus.

I cry your pardon, yet she is most fair.

Vistillia.

The curse of all the gods be on her head ;
The vengeance of the Furies blight her days !
Oh for the power to drive her through all climes,
Accursed and mad with thirst and stung with pain,
As jealous Juno drove the fair-haired Io
From the rich plains of Argus further on
To the white shores of the Mæotic strait !

Flaccus.

You love him still, my sister, even yet ?

Vistillia.

Was he not mine ? Had I not prior claim ?
Had he not certified a thousand oaths
Swearing he loved me, and for seven years,
That seems now seven days, in which we grew
No older ; not a hair turned gray nor wrinkle
Upon our foreheads seamed to mark Time's flight.
Exceeding happiness and changeless youth —

For seven sweet years did he not call me wife?
Wife of his heart — though not by public vows
Before a god's shrine wedded — till the day
She came, and like some god's incarnate curse
Turned love to hate — my day to hell-black night,
And shame — the shame that is the shamefullest;
The dread of women that with groans and tears
Causes the white-haired mother rue the hour
Her womb brought forth alive — this foulest shame
She brought me in her fascinating eye,
And in th' ensnaring cunning of her limbs,
Perfect in white proportions.

Flaccus.

Now the gods
Have given her your prey, what day more ripe
Than this to crown this pious festival
With a sublimer spectacle than lambs
Flower-chapleted upon their shining fleece?
Betray her to the augurs and the priests.

Vistillia.

What then — what proofs sustaining such a charge?

Flaccus.

She would acknowledge, yea, and not deny;
Even now I dare be sworn by all the gods
She is not further from this holy hill
Than I might cast a white stone through yon trees,
Standing like sentinel guards around his house,

And light upon his portico, perchance,
Where to the symbol of her God she kneels,
Praying against her husband's piety
That gave to-day's oblation and the feast.

Vistillia.

That might await invidious reflection —
How long since thou wert taint with this infection?

Flaccus.

The folly of my youth, ah, name it not !
And yet, dear gods, it seemed a glorious hope
To light the drear, dark slope of human life
That only leads us downward to the grave.
For what is life? — a breath, a dream, a flame ;
Sweet odor of a flower or rank of weed ;
A breath that perishes in its exhalation ;
A dream of shadows, then a shadowless sleep ;
A flame that dies even of itself consumed
In the black void of Death — but Christ had dared
To promise immortality and love
From his inflowing divinity through faith.
But this, too, ended as the lees of life —
A breath, a dream, a flame that of itself
Exhausted its vitality ! Ah ! list !
The chant begins of those who, too, have been
Deluded, but recant their errors now.

A company who have abjured the Christian faith advance to the altar, singing as they slowly march :

As exiles return to their own land
 From regions where men dread to be
 From wild wastes and salt seaweed-sown land,
 And sobbing winds moaning o'er sea —
 We turn to the gods that are living,
 Whose worship brings sunshiny days,
 And join at your altars in giving
 Oblations, sweet odors, and praise.

We come as escaping from prison,
 A dungeon-cell cheerless and damp,
 To the light of the sun fully risen,
 Who 've known but a dull smoking lamp.
 From the stark, lifeless Christ on the gibbet,
 Whom vainly we deemed was divine,
 To the gods of our sires who exhibit
 A sweeter and lovelier shrine.

From the tomb of Earth's highest ambitions,
 A charnel-house full of dead joy,
 Where they taught us Love's fondest fruitions
 Allure to delude and destroy ;
 Where we made ourselves sad as we brooded
 And gave our days up to vain prayer,
 By the word of a dead man deluded,
 For a heaven we could not tell where.

But days lost in useless devotion,
 Oh memory bitter as gall !
 They have fled as the waves of the ocean,
 The gods even ne'er can recall.

Our youth and the joy that youth's store is,
 Desire and the great hopes that burn —
 Love, Pleasure, and Earth's fearless glories
 To us can, ah, never return.

For shadows will creep over heaven,
 A pall seem to darken the Earth,
 And Doubt brings Life surfeit for leaven
 And jangles the sweet bells of Mirth;
 While the habit of Virtue — the fowler—
 Clips the wings of the fair bird Desire,
 Hard choice 'twixt the gloom of the cowl or
 The heart's smouldering, perishing fire.

Flaccus.

True as the sibyl's words or oracles
 On wave-worn cliffs or groves where gods are hid!
 The world no longer seems the same to me
 As in those fearless days when Pleasure shrined
 Herself in Nature, like a palpable god,
 And bade me follow. Flaming suns and stars,
 The torches that lit paths for reveling Night,
 Can never shine for me as in those times
 Of blood unchilled and heart, that felt desire
 Seedlike to grow or budwise to unfold
 Into the flower Fruition. Ah, methinks
 This is the Galilean's triumph yet,
 Gorgon-like, turning our diviner selves
 To stone of dead desires — heart-ashes, too,
 Like dust of last year's leaves and shriveled flowers,
 Eddied by frosty winds where the old paths

Of Love are brier-grown. So all my youth
Was fed on barren hopes, as some poor babe
That suckling finds the shriveled bosom milkless —
My heart is choked with dust.

Vistillia.

A homily
Which in the places where the Christians meet,
With little change of words, had made them hear
Christ's spirit speaking through you. Hark! again,
The Bacchantes come forth dancing in reply.

Bacchantes (Dancing and singing).

Come dance and sing,
While Youth and Spring
Give Hope a wing
To fly with;
Ere Age and Care
Steal unaware,
And bring Despair
To die with.

Hence, solemn fools,
Ascetic rules,
And cowléd schools,—
Oh madness!
When Love has lips,
And Pleasure sips,
The crushed grape drips
In gladness.

In the Gods' Shadow.

No gifts to man
 Are sweeter than
 The wild god Pan
 Doth measure ;
 The sparkling grape,
 The glowing shape,
 That Love may rape
 At pleasure.

Can calloused knees
 Of devotees
 Compare with these
 For sweetness ?
 With Sleep soft pressed
 On fondled breast
 To round Joy's best
 Completeness.

Flaccus.

Like nymphs they dance as if their sinuous bodies
 Were flexible and bent as reeds to winds,
 To melodies of pastoral pipes, as once
 Fauns and weird satyrs and the sylvan rout
 In merry mad abandon danced with Pan.
 But, to return :
 This may be harvest-day, if you elect.

Vistillia.

I fain would win his soul by smiles of love —
 Not barbs of hate and malice that corrodes,

For Love is mightier; and had gods made men
With souls to know the joys of constancy,
Lasting, but hate, like fire and molten lead,
Burns and destroys and lasts but for a time,
And then dies out in ashes of remorse.
But listen, Gallus speaks. O deathless gods!
His very tones pierce through my heart like songs
Of Love and Life.

GALLUS *from the brow of the hill addresses
the assembly:*

Gallus.

Here on this green hill, neighbors, friends, and ye,
If any such be here from other cities,
Who love the gods whom Rome adores and loves —
Here where I found this purple flower of Spring,
The favorite of the blue-eyed goddess, here
Bring wood to build an altar — build it thus
So that the red-winged flame may find a way
Through every part; then let the Priests advance,
Chanting their prayers to the immortal gods,
And immolate the sacrifice; and as
The rich aroma borne on fragrant wings
Of camphor, sandal, and Arabian gums,
And washed in rare Falernian wines, ascends,
Let the selected virgins, too, advance,
And gathering in a circle clasp their hands
And sing the praises of the gracious gods,
And supplicate the blessings of the year.

But first, as fit, seeing that every Spring,
Soon as the sap begins to circulate
Through the white woody arteries of the trees,
I have for many years upon these grounds —
My father's from his father's, and continuing
The pious custom which he ne'er forgot —
Offered the gods a sacrifice of praise,
I once again repeat my public prayers,
Not with lip-service, if I know my heart,
But with the inward unction of the soul ;
For quiet days of life and such a state,
Balanced between th' effeminate luxury
Wealth o'ermuch breeds, and the immoral care
And griping tempt of ill-fed poverty,
Whereby I find the time to feed my mind
With the great words and deeds of noble men ;
Seers and sweet singers, men of golden speech,
Shooting my thoughts after their own high aims ;
And chiefly do I thank th' undying gods
For reverence and the spirit of belief
Which in me is, and for my mother's heart,
Kindly intentioned unto everything ;
Sorrows of men and creatures everywhere,
And that delight in Nature which I feel —
Sun, moon, and stars, flower-growings, whispering
 nights,
Bird songs, and chirps of crickets in the fields,
And lovely fluttering of bright-blossomed winged
 things

•

O'er woodland pools where Dryads might be hid,
Or reedy meadows fit for shaggy fauns.
Also I thank the gods with thanks unfeigned
For a pure name bequeathed me from a line
Of ancestry white with unsullied fame,
Extending back beyond that distant day
When fled o'er the salt sea from Greece he came —
My ancestor coeval with this town,
A warrior mighty on the wave and land —
To build himself an enviable name
And house on Roman ground, and with this name
Not unknown in the world, and in times past
Father and grandsire both in the front ranks
Of enterprise and glory, I give thanks
That I can joy in glorious deeds, and read
Great books, and hear immortal songs without
Feeling the urgent spirit of Ambition
Spurring me from my quiet fields and fire
To seek new laurels, or to tease the Muse,
Praying for musical words and rhythmic thought,
Which I so love; and last, but also chief,
Even as reverence, faith, and other gifts,
Good through and through and without stain of evil —
Last-mentioned, since to praise I must add prayer,
I thank the gods for the white light of home,
A noble wife in whom is triple grace;
Grace of a perfect form and radiant face,
Sweet eyes and voice and long and lustrous hair;
Grace of a mind unsullied, and more rare,

Grace of a spotless soul of womanhood
Who seeks her honors in her husband's praise.
Loving and gentle, sacrificing self,
And making of her common household duties
Sacraments all, and of her charms and powers
Helps and new ways to cheer her husband's life,
To lighten all his labor, buoy his hope,
Redouble joy and lessen care by half:
But unto us, and romping through our halls,
The prattle of sweet children, our own fruit,
Sounds not; nor round our hearth on snowy nights,
While the red-hearted log throbs in the fire,
Faces of her and me in miniature
Shine not. Wherefore for this we pray the gods
Fruitful to make the augur's prophecy,
Which promised me that from her womb should
 spring
Children to take the edge from our old age,
So that I may see, long ere whitening hairs,
Red lips upon the pink buds of her breasts:
Offspring — the flower and fruitage of our love.
And something like a gloom is o'er our house,
Impalpable yet real, for my sweet wife
Some vague indisposition clouds her heart,
In that she is not here nor cares to come;
Wherefore I end my praise and prayers with this:
That the dear gods remember her past life,
White as the sunlight and as fragrant showers,
And so restore the joys of other days.

CHIEF PRIEST *arising in his robes addresses
Gallus first and then the assembly :*

Chief Priest.

The gods unto the upright man whose heart
Is fixed to give them worship all his days
Look ever with sweet favor — when they give,
Gracious, and gracious when their hands withhold.
For men pray often to their hurt, and often
The gods give wicked men their hearts' desire,
In anger to destroy them, and to prayer
Persistent nor sūbmissive they send meat
That surely brings great leanness to their lives.
And thee, dear Gallus, have the gods long loved,
And made thee fat with blessings, and no doubt
Will make the augur's prophecy true in time ;
But be not over-desirous, for though blest
The increase of the womb and of good omen,
Strengthening pure love with stronger bands and
bringing

New ties and pleasures, and to wedded women
New honors and more rounded perfect life,
And to the father graver thoughts and duty —
Yet oft the mother nurses at her breast
Her future's greatest sorrow, and gives life
And milk of love and yearning of her heart,
Prayers and the sleepless vigils of long nights
To children's weal that thrive in years to come,
To bring her and the sire whose love they shared

Disgrace and heartbreak and a ruined home.
This have I said, emboldened by my office,
Not as though Gallus needed from my lips
Reproof or guidance, for we know him well
As one well pleasing to th' undying gods,
And faithful in his ways, and all his house,
Whom all men honor, and a citizen
Whom rulers do delight in. Such a man
Brings safety and the blessings of the gods
To the community wherein he dwells —
A model for young men, and to his friends
Companionable hours that leave no sting,
Wise thoughts and holy sayings and strong cheer
To heavy hearts and minds perplexed and vexed.
And now, dear friends, upon this altar raised
Of unhewn stones, we offer to the gods
The red flesh and the golden fat of lambs,
Wine-washed and mingled with the ruby blood,
The fleece and heart and ivory bones entire,
And spices, and rich odors, and rare flowers.
But let not any soul deceive itself,
Nor think burnt-offerings savory to the gods,
From unclean hands and sodden lives of sin,
Which are most execrable in their eyes,
A stench unto their nostrils; and for such
Their wrath comes on men to the uttermost —
Famines and plagues of sickness and of wars,
Fires and disease among their flocks, and dearth
Of crops and madness and contrary spirits;

Temptations to destruction and base deaths.
Therefore let each one question his own soul,
And try his spirit, if with simple faith,
And love and deep repentance for ill thoughts,
Pure purpose and intent to live aright,
He kneels and offers to the heart-reading gods
His prayer and praise ; and let such be assured
The gods to him are listening and grant prayers,
And all that comes to him, however clothed
In what strange raiment, even though of pain,
Comes mercifully, and sent forth of gods
To prove him and to make his after life
More precious. And to such Death makes not
Life

A trembling slave that fears the Master's call,
But resting on the favor of the gods
Gives up his breath, like one whom Glory seeks
With hands and heart ready for any fate.

*The sacrifice is offered and the Priests advance
singing :*

First Priest.

Should there be any one here
Wicked in hand and in heart,
Straying afar from thy fear,
Gods, or have fallen apart
From thy worship and service, forgive
And let the offending soul live.

Second Priest.

Here, if, unfilial in soul,
Maidens and men shall have stood,
Let not thy hot anger roll,
Spare ye the innocent blood.
O gods, pardon freely the vice,
Accepting the soul's sacrifice.

Third Priest.

Sins of the mind and the body,
Sins of the flesh and the soul,
Youth with the hot blood all ruddy,
Age that has not learned control—
The sins that beset and that harden,
O gods, that are merciful, pardon.

All Priests.

For now in the warm breathing atmosphere
 hover
The blessings of heaven, the sunlight and rain,
That falling on just and the unjust discover
The hearts of the gods to the children of men;
And as green plants that blossom return back to
 heaven
The sweet living odors flower-hidden again,
So the human heart touched sues for self first
 forgiven,
And then for all sinners repenting their stains.

Virgins advance singing.

First Virgin.

For the blessing that lies
In the sunshiny skies,
For the blessing the dew-fall and rain-shower
supplies—

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

Second Virgin.

For the warm lapping airs,
For the soil that prepares,
Like a soul rich in pure thoughts the harvest it
bears —

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

Third Virgin.

For the hope of the tree,
And the promise that be
In the vine and the tuber and the fruit of the sea —

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

Fourth Virgin.

For the flocks that increase,
For their milk and their fleece,

For the herds that grow sleek in the pastures of
peace —

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

Fifth Virgin.

For the joys we have had,
For the hopes that make glad
The hearts that without them were heavy and sad —

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

Sixth Virgin.

For all Beauty and Love,
And sweet spirits that move
And speak to our souls from the spring and the
grove —

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

Seventh Virgin.

For the winds that waft home,
O'er the perilous foam,
The white-pinioned ships that to foreign parts
roam —

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

A Matron (kneeling).

For the child from the womb,
And the voice from the tomb,
And the oracle chasing its shadows of gloom —

All in concert.

We praise thee, O bountiful gods.

Priests and Virgins.

Liberal gods that float on invisible wings,
Deep in the steel-blue depths of the ice-chilled
springs;
Gods whose viewless steps are in solitudes
Of whispering lithe green leaves and the murmuring
woods;
Tolerant gods that linger in affluent plains
Of velvet grass, fresh wet from the warm recent rains;
Divinities all, whose majesty consciously fills
The summits, upraised altar-like, of the loftiest hills,
Or who dwell in languorous ease
'Neath the rushes of the seas,
Or the fondling generous air,
Spirit essence everywhere,
Incorporeal deities,
In or under curved blue skies;
Gods of seasons, calms, and storms,
Gracious face or frowning forms,
Whom we serve or love or fear;
Gods whose wills forecast the year,

And whose wishes are the springs
Of the ways of Luck and Chance,
All misnamed haphazard things,
All we know as Circumstance ;
All the powers where'er they be,
That we feel but cannot see,
Jove and Neptune, Mars and he,
Swift wing-footed Mercury ;
Venus, lily-like, when she
Blossomed from the silvery sea,
Shaggy satyr, goat-hoofed Pan,
And the water-nymphs that run
From the sight of mortal man,
Lest their eyes profane should scan
White breasts drying in the sun —
Each we honor here and raise
Prayer, burnt-offerings, and praise.
Grant us length of pastoral days,
Joys of home and prosperous ways ;
Hearts without the vain pretense
That begets irreverence ;
And a body likewise whole,
Free from blemish as the soul ;
Godlike strength and temperate health
And sufficiency of wealth.
Prayer the wife with husband joins
For the dear fruit of their loins ;
Bless clasped hands and reverent knees
And sweet domesticities ;

And in grassy wastes preserve
Eweless lambs that bleat, and swerve
From the fleecy folds that share
Safety in the shepherd's care.
Bring to stalk and golden ear
Pregnant seeds to planters dear,
Guarding waving fields from stings,
Awl of gnat or horny wings.
Save in harvest fruit-bent trees
From bird-bills and wasps and bees,
Or in red-leaf days and sunny,
When the sap is changed to honey,
Keep our maples from the breath
Gale-blown from salt seas of Death.
So in humble piety
Shall our days and wishes be,
Shall each life unstained by crimes,
Civic turmoil of the times,
Or the sin Ambition shares,
Grow from youth until it bears
Snow-white crown of reverent hairs ;
And at Nature's closing ray
Death be but the shining way
Twilight leads the dying day,
Sleep that soothes the weary hour
Or the closing of a flower,
Gently to that world from this,
And unsorrowing, like Dis.

A Priest.

The rites are done. The blood-red altar smokes
With wine and pleasant saviors to the gods,
Who also love to see the sons of men
Light-heartedly enjoy earth's fresh good gifts ;
Therefore let each be lord of his own time,
Led of the joy that seemeth good to him,
In game or dance or as he will till noon.

*They separate to various dances, and games
and social conversation.*

*Chorus.**First Priestess.*

The god again hath seized my soul,
Again I see dark shadows roll
Some awful ill portending.
Two forms but now before me stood,
But dimly seen and stained with blood :
Alas, what horrent evils wait
The soul the gods immortal hate !
In envy or for sin undoing
Ever ceaselessly pursuing ;
Ever with their actions blending
Till they overwhelmed be
In the grasp of Destiny.

Second Priestess.

Is one a woman's form ?
As lithe as Dian buskined for the chase,

Or Hebe ere she fell, all smiles, all grace ?
 Alas, on her white bosom can you trace,
 Yet breathing soft and warm,
 A drop, a jet that now becomes a flood —
 Away, it is of blood !
 O star-zoned Venus, that a thing so fair
 So dread a fate should share !

First Priestess.

The burden is of love betrayed,
 Nor wedded wife, nor virgin maid,
 Is this the fruit love bears —
 Delicious sins and heavy-eyed despairs ?
 O woman, ever weak and ever mourning,
 Ever to thy heart and love a prey,
 The sorrow and the lonely desolate yearning,
 Or else the darkness and the constant burning
 When men and gods betray
 Virtue that yields not, dying broken-hearted,
 Or, sadder still, life, love, and hope, and fame
 departed !

Second Priestess.

Ah me, whichever way the fates may prove,
 An altogether evil thing is Love ;
 And wise is she who, held in Dian's chaste
 protection,
 Has steeled her heart against the gods, and men's
 affection.

Woe to the virgin whose uncovered charms
The amorous Jove espies !
Alas, the sheen of bare white legs and arms,
Or bosoms that tempt deities from the skies !
The vengeance of the goddesses pursue,
The wrath of Juno will the hapless maiden rue,
And man's love e'er is made of broken faiths
And jealous sorrows and unholy deaths.

Chorus of Priestesses.

Darker clouds arise,
And on the Earth the red of blood.
A shower of flame rains downward from the skies
Seething the grass, wet with th' ensanguined
flood.
The vision grows more clear.
Alas, the dread fulfilment draws more near,
The drama of the gods is ripe for speech ;
Two actors come, dread Fate pursuing each !

*At various parts of the field the revelers are
seen, while Vistillia and Gallus approach
from different directions and meet at the
base of the hill of sacrifice.*

Gallus.

I had not dreamed to find thee here to-day.

Vistillia.

Once thy quick eye had pierced a larger throng,

Impatient and expectant for my face,
Or meeting unexpectedly surprise
Had doubled joy. Alas, how changed thou art !

Gallus.

With no ill-will. Oh, I would spare thee pain ;
The gods that read the open hearts of men
Know I would not add so much weight of sorrow
Unto thee as th' impalpable burden borne
Upon the sessile thistle-seed in air.

Vistillia.

In every word thou dost unsheathe a dagger.

Gallus.

Not purposely. Oh, let our paths divide
As the divergent streams that meet no more !

Vistillia.

Once parting was to thee the curse of Jove.

Gallus.

Full well I know th' intention of thy thought ;
But there are words a woman should not speak,
Thoughts she should veil, nor by a blush confess,
And feelings which should roll no surging wave
Of bold expression tongeward for her sex —

Vistillia.

Love is not circumscribed in ardent souls
By sex, or by the stale decrees of custom ;

But sexless, like a disembodied spirit,
Pleads its dear cause ; or, like the incensed Jove,
Thunders its wrath and shrieks for dire revenge,
Even though fleshed in woman's frailer frame,
As 'tis a law a prophetess may speak,
When brooded o'er by the oracular god,
With the divine authority of a priest,
Unhedged by the restrictions of her sex,
Though born a woman and by fame debarred.

Gallus.

Oh say not so ; nay, but thou art too bold,
O'erleaping womanly usage and shy ways,
Birdlike, that so become her milder soul ;
And to be over bold finds less desert,
Even in th' insatiate eyes of uncloyed Love,
Than to be over coy, which whets Desire.

Vistillia.

What changed unnatural heart is this of thine,
Whose fountains spray forth waters sweet and
bitter !
Gods ! what a different burden was thy plaint
When first thy soul confessed in me a sovereign !
My unwon spirit, free and passion-proof,
Like Dian, scorned the yoke of mortal man,
And with unfeigned indifference heard thy suit,
Loving to rather lose myself in fields
Of yellow bloom, blue larkspur, or to climb
O'er dizzy crags most inaccessible,

Journéying the sun-bright Summer ; or by the sea —
The gale-blown sea whose salty spray and air
Breathes but of Neptune's mermaids amber-haired —
I loved to wander gathering curious shells ;
Else o'er the glittering wave, when other girls,
Their white arms flashing even as its crest,
Rowed, I was foremost of the fleet ; yet praise
Of man I valued not, especially thine.
Then to thy wild persistence and despair
I listened curiously, and lo, Compassion —
A god astray to do a virgin harm —
Pleading thy cause fulfilled my woman's doom :
A maid who harkens ever is undone.

Gallus.

Even the gods pursue, the virgins flee,
Showing us the celestial way of Love —
The man aggressive, but the virgin shy.

Vistillia.

Was I not such ? Alas, but love confessed,
The shadow Shame flits like the cloudy Night
Before the kindling Day dissolvéd quite.

Gallus.

Love is a fawn that shuns the hunter's eye
In leafy copse, and woman wins this way,
Fleeing Love's ardent glance and haunting step,
And yet inflames more by her blushful shame
Than beauty unabashed that turns to woo.

Vistillia.

Yea, even a wild gazelle upon the hills,
Conquered at last, forsakes its rocky haunts
To smooth the tamer's hands. Ah, doubly harsh,
Snakelike in tongue as those whose twice-forked
fang

Cuts the receding flesh, and in the wound
From the near bulb injects a poisoned flood —
Thou, first to win with long persistent suit,
And then to argue thus ! Whose genial ray
First thawed the ice of maidenly reserve,
Striving to haste the Spring of Love to Summer,
And chid me then for being over frigid
As now for the reverse ?

Gallus.

This is a woman :

Fragrant, a flower, the darling of the sun,
Veiling its beauty when the god of day
Closes his loving eye — that droops and wilts
Until his beams shine light and love again :
But when the winter time of love has come
Dies blossom, leaf, and root.

Vistillia.

There is one sun
Potent that brings to birth and blesses all,—
Grass, tree, and flower, and every living thing,—
Light-loving, but it grows no bitterness.

Oh, surely ne'er was bitterness like Love's,
 Sweet to the lips, but gall unto the soul.
 There is one only sun, but many men.
 Suitors innumerable were at my feet ;
 Strong, too, of arm, and fleet of foot as thee,
 Brave, and in mind and soul not less than thee.
 Ah, serpent-wise again, why didst thou seek
 One, mayhap sole of all, who feigned to love
 Assiduously to win my maiden heart,
 Then trample it as tigers sprung for prey
 Crush the wild flowers they sniffed beneath their
 paws,
 Careless what love of bees or light of sun
 Cared for and nourished them. This is a man :
 A changeful tyrant, faithful when disdained,
 Constant to frowns and suing when denied.
 Ardent pursuing ; in possession cold,
 To whom the heart a clinging captive made
 Has lost its most attractive charm and gift.
 Ah me, inconstant as the treacherous sea !
 What men call Love is Passion's least foul guise
 Arrayed in stolen robes of royal love,
 As cold gray flint or snow on mountain tops
 In distance gleams like silver veins, or gems.
 Have I not found it so ?

Gallus.

O libelous

And harsh, to hold the reason of a man

T' account, for the light fancy of a boy !
Who mourns last Summer's sweetness in this May?
But rather thanks the gods for pleasures past,
And seeks t' extract from new and living sources
Their deep-pent treasures, as the thieving bee
Flits o'er dead flowers, but sucks from living bloom
The sugary deposit.

Vistillia.

Have three years,
That even on Cæsar, with the ponderous weight
Of world-wide empire pressing on his soul,
Have left no visible mark — have three short years
So widened, broadened, amplified thy soul
That now the man scorns th' unaccountable boy ?
How has thy taste improved — thy soul grown
grand?

What now inspires that then thy mind knew not
Being dull and eyeless to its higher range?
In what to which thy soul was then attuned,
The perfect harmonies that swell therein
Now hear but discord as our skilled musicians
Turn stunned from clanging of barbaric horns
Or art thou still the same, and it may be
Some fatal fault in me — some dire defect
Hid from thy sight three years ago is now
In all its rude deformity exposed?
Or perhaps ungentle time, and partial too,
Dealing, like men, less tenderly with woman

Than man, 't is haply some sad mark of age,
Grief, or the burning fire of Love itself,
Flaming too fiercely for the too weak lamp
In which it shrined itself, are all to blame.
Yet if a cheek or eye alone intralled
This cheek, is it less fair? these eyes less true,
This heart less loving — yea, this heart less chaste?
Thou durst not say it, yet this love of mine —

Gallus.

Is Love a wanton whose salacious eye
By the mere catalogue of fleshly charms
Is snared, as gallants in the streets of Rome
Follow inviting eyes or shapely legs,
Or glowing bosoms smooth to all men's hands?

Vistillia.

Have I no claim? And after all these years?

Gallus.

Then Love is that great bitter ill of men,
Dreaded than Death, or that appalling change
When wise lips lose their wisdom, and instead
Babble of foolish fancies and strange thoughts
Fantastic — then is Love the bondsman's curse.
When the heart changes, if with iron ties
Law shackles still the soul to one unloved,
Fast bound, like galley slaves unto the oar,
So to the heart's aversion. By the gods!

What man can bid Love go or bid him stay?
If love be free, then lovers joy as gods.
But the unwilling kiss, or forced embrace,
Is as a dead man's touch.

Vistillia.

How many times
Vehemently hast thou argued otherwise,
Swearing what oaths that thou wert ever mine?

Gallus.

Forbear — if that sweet helplessness of woman
That cannot plead its love, but voiceless dies —
If that be not in thee, then summon pride,
That sterner virtue of our Roman ladies;
That serious vestal call, Philosophy,—
Whate'er may nerve thee calmly to bear sorrow,
That as thy soul resolved thus bravely dares
Will crystallize its bitter into sweetness;
For all souls find in their extremity
The gods have pitted deep in seeming Sorrow
Th' eternal kernel Joy. Oh, hold it true,
And pain —

Vistillia.

The gods now judge between us twain.
Just are the gods, and not to be deceived
By words that echo with a pious sound,
Or bribed by altars heaped and obvious zeal.
I, if for sin the gods, who cannot bear

Foulness or aught uncleanliness of soul —
I now bear punishment as those who have
Transgressed their law, yet not the less to thee,
The instrument by whom the gods afflict me,
Will come in their due time affliction too,
In that thy hand hath smitten without pity,
Being alike in guilt, and with smooth words,
Each as the cat's paw, velvet to the touch,
Hides in its cushion the sharp piercing claw,
Cutting a jagged sorrow in my soul,
Worse than keen tusk or tearing claw. Aye, know
Even now I am avenged ; the draught of woe
Which thou so heartlessly wouldst have me quaff
The gods give thee.

Gallus.

Thou speakest as with power.
What meanest thou ? what threat lies in that word ?

Vistillia.

Thou hast despised my love for one less warm.

Gallus.

Beware ! Let not thy lips forswear thy life.

Vistillia.

The cold, chaste beauty that holds thee enthralled
Scarce loves thee — on mere sufferance stands thy
love.

Gallus.

Durst thou ! — Oh, even thou shouldst fear my hate !

Vistillia.

Nay, prove it to thyself, if thou wouldst see.
She meets thee not with raptures as of old,
Nor eyes enkindled eloquent with love,
Renewing youth and hope on each occasion
With a fresh gladness, nor a wistful face
Where hunger yields to final satisfaction
To greet thy coming home. About her lies
An air of chill abstraction as of one
Indifferent, or who dwells in other worlds,
Her body here but all her thoughts and spirits
Alien, and her eyes on other scenes,
Or even as one awaking from a couch,
Sleep-walking. Does she ever praise thee now?
Neighbors and friends and all who know thee well
Praise thee—does e'er their praise awake her
pride?

The things thou lovest, are they made her care?
Surely it well becomes a Roman wife,
Who holds the praise of far-off men and times
Worthless or trivial balanced in the scale
With commendation from the man she loves,
Their children, or a-building happy homes—
It well becomes her as the bridal wreath
Blossomed and wound around her shining hair
To make her husband's hopes hers, and his tastes
Hers, and to see through his eyes and to feel
Her heart and his throb pulse for pulse, not two
But one indissolubly united heart;

Twin blossoms springing from a common stem
And welded by contiguous growth to one.

Gallus.

The gods have made thee variant with thyself,
Mouth against heart, for this, though filled with
hate

And evil surmise that the gods who guard
Pure souls against the craft of evil minds,
Have used to limn with nice precision, my wife,
In whom there is no difference in the least
From thy true picture of a perfect wife,
No wanderer from her home nor save indeed
As all true hearts delight in good men's praise,
Anxious to please the thoughts of aught save me,
From whom her joys and honors radiate,
In whom her thoughts and highest hopes are centered ;

Therefore, this knowing, steeled against suspicion,
The sickly spleen of thy vile jealousy
On my invulnerable faith
Makes no impression more than yeasty waves
Upon the iron-hard prow that cuts them through
But even if thy surmisings were all true,
I love her more than ever I loved thee.

Vistillia.

She loves another more than she loves thee,
And so the gods avenge me on thy wrong.

Gallus.

My love may laugh at this. Oh weakly false,
She who is "cold" and "chaste" and "chill," be
sure
The current of her blood runs ever thus,
Seeking no paramour or guilty love.

Vistillia.

By all the gods I swear I speak the truth :
She loves a malefactor more than thee.

Gallus.

Name him — attire this most improbable lie
In hell's worst cunning, but its livery
Would fit so ill, the figure were grotesque.

Vistillia.

Ah, lynx-eyed mole when lovers are compared !
Trusting that will not harbor fear nor see !
Gallus, thou fightest an almighty rival —
A woman's religion — the proverbial zeal,
Of a young convert's fresh and novel faith,
Before which fade all love and hopes of men.
Nor wisdom of gray hairs nor strength of arm,
Power nor the quick agility of youth
Nor honors nor the sweetest gifts of Earth
Have power to cope with the enthusiasm
New converts feel, but smitten to death and slain
Ingloriously, and even a mother's love

Turns evil to the prattling babe that lies
Held on her knees and with its dimpled feet
Toying ; how much more to her husband's creed,
Which in the sight of her enlightened eyes
Is evil as the plague or snake-wise cursed.

Gallus.

I follow not thy meaning — art thou mad ?

Vistillia.

The criminal executed in Judea,
The Christ so-called — this white-souled wife of
thine

Is of those atheists who worship him ;
So if perchance
Thou wouldst now go unto the Coliseum,
Or to a feast, or to a public game,
Or even as now give offerings to the gods,
She will not dare profane herself to go,
Preferring with that low, malignant sect
Hating mankind to hold unnatural orgies
Unfit for the pure eyes of day to see.

Gallus.

Thou hast cut in my heart ; if this be true —

Vistillia.

Hadst thou been less her slave it had been patent.

Gallus.

How didst thou learn it ? How cam'st thou to know ?

Vistillia.

What matter how one sick caught the disease?

Gallus.

'T is false ! The gods I serve would spare me this.

Vistillia.

Have I not served them? Have they spared me
pain ?

Gallus.

But not to suffer such a shame as this —
A wife false to the gods and my deep love.

Vistillia.

Why worse than thee, false to my love and fame?

Gallus.

But truly she did fondly love me once.

Vistillia.

But now her love and lips are all toward Christ.

Gallus.

A Jew — a Jew — and even of Jews despised.

Vistillia.

For this thou spurn'st my love and bade depart
For one who shudders at thee as accurst.

Gallus.

If this be true —

Vistillia.

If thou canst prove it false
Hurl me from Tarpeia's rocks sheer to the base.

Gallus.

Then may the gods doom me to their worst hate
If I do not receive thee back again.

Vistillia.

And she who stole thee from my previous claim ?

Gallus.

I leave her to the gods she has forsworn.

Vistillia.

The edict reads that those who harbor Christians
Shall suffer with them. Thou must yield her up.

Gallus.

Thou hast not proved it true — it must be false.

Vistillia.

Then listen ; lo, the gods have fought for me !

*As they converse they have walked apart
from the company close to Gallus's house,
separated from his garden by a hedge of
trees. Julia is in the garden, singing. Gal-
lus motions Vistillia away, who returns to
the revelers while he listens.*

*In the Gods' Shadow.**Julia (singing).*

Jesus, Saviour, Power of God,
At thy altar, low I lie !
Deign to me thy grace afford,
Deign to harken to my cry.
Impotent my will and power,
Vain the help that man can give ;
Be my strength each passing hour,
Be my help while here I live.

Gallus (solus).

How like a bird she sings that mounts to heaven,
Borne on the wings of his own ecstasy !

Julia.

Jesus, Wisdom, Power Divine,
Pity my dark ignorance !
Light of Life, within me shine,
Ever guide me with thy glance.
Guard from man's philosophy,
Purge my heart from self-esteem ;
Let thy Cross my study be,
Be thy Love my constant theme.

Gallus (solus).

How sweet that face like heaven's sunny skies,
When all the gods smile on us, and that cheek
Fairer than Hebe's or the rosy stain
Blushed through the milk-white cup she brought to
Jove.

I could forgive her every crime but this.
Gods! not for me she keeps her love, but rather
To waste her prayers upon the Crucified,
Despising the immortal gods for Him —
The gods that send us favoring winds and skies,
Full-loaded harvests, corn and vines and oil,
The increase of our flock and all our joys.

(After a pause.)

And yet 't were death to cleave my soul from hers.

(Discovers himself.)

Julia.

My lord, what heavy cloud is o'er thy heart?

Gallus.

Thy absence blots the sunshine from my soul.

Julia.

Flesh is a weak source for true happiness.

Gallus.

But love is the divinest gift of gods.

Julia.

But love fails in the palsying hour of death.

Gallus.

At death man's only hope is in the gods.

Julia.

They have not lifted up the veil for hope.

Gallus.

We have been happy — have we not been blest?

Julia.

Aye, my dear lord, but ever o'er our heads
That sword of Damocles — dissevering Death.

Gallus.

What change is this? Why is thy heart estranged
Far from the gods? for this way come sad fears
And moody fancies, but the gods delight
To crown with blessing those who honor them.

Julia.

Have e'er they given thee thy heart's full prayer?

Gallus.

Even now 't is answered ; even this very morn,
Learning the will of the unchanging gods
From entrails of the birds that sing their praise,
The future-reading augurs prophesy
To us a child if thou wilt join with me
In offerings and garlands to the gods
Upon this dedication at this time.

Julia.

My lord, I cannot — never to thy gods.

Gallus.

Dear love, what joy can happen save through
them?

Julia.

The gods thou worshippest are only demons,
Whose service is destruction worse than death.

Gallus.

Oh, deathless curses on th' abhorrent tongue
Whose deadly casuistry hath so misled thee !

Julia.

Truth speaks to those who have an open heart,
Susceptible, and those who hear obey.

Gallus.

Why shouldst thou spurn the gracious gods we love,
Or wake the dreaded wrath of those we fear ?

Julia.

There is no fear of wrath of men or gods
To those in shelter of the Truth divine.

Gallus.

Bethink thee of thy noble father's life,
Who died in faith and service of the gods.

Julia.

No soul is sponsor for another's life ;
I cannot hurt him, nor can he help me.

Gallus.

Thou canst thy mother ; and her reverent head,
White with the snow of venerable years,
Will droop with shame at thy apostasy.

Julia.

I see a shining path, and at the end
A great light burning. I must follow on,
Drawn onward by my inelectable fate.

Gallus.

How is my heart made desolate, and my home,
And bitter all the service of my life,
Almost as if my gods had failed my hope.

Julia.

At any time have e'er thy gods found voice
Answering thy prayers, or held an unstopped ear
To pity or preserve? At any time
Hath the dim plastic future mapped itself
Before their incorporeal sight aright,
That seer, priest, virgin, fasting or by vigils
Alone on lonely mountains, or strong prayers,
Weeping for sin, induced thy gods to speak
Through them of days yet distant? Gods of
stone,
Chiseled by cunning hands from quarried blocks;
Idols of wood of which the hewer stood
Who felled it from the green umbrageous trees,
And meditated, leaning on his ax:
"This part shall fire consume to give me warmth,
Cooking my food; this part the carver's craft
Shall fashion me a god" — a dead, dried stick,
Without the sappy life it had in the forest,

When winds blew through its stirring leaves, and
made
The semblance of a voice that all might hear.

Gallus.

Have not the oracles the future read?

Julia.

With double meaning ever do they speak,
Which any after fact may aptly fit.

Gallus.

I worship not dumb images, which are
But visible reminders of the gods,
Who are themselves invisible and hid.

Julia.

I worship Christ alone, th' Incarnate God.

Gallus.

O wife, this Galilean turns a curse!
Darkly between our lives and mutual hopes
The blighting shadow of His Cross is cast,
Like sudden death and ends of life-long loves.

Julia.

I love God more, but love thee no whit less.

Gallus.

But ah, the bitter, bitter fruit of Christ!
That sweet companionship — that linked heart,
Whose pulse beat time with mine, beats so no more.

Julia.

I love and reverence thee, my husband, still.

Gallus.

Thou walk'st a different path — a way diverse :
'T is not in me — there is no change in me ;
Thou hast forsaken me, and not I thee ;
Thou hast turned false unto thy mother's gods,
Forsworn thy childhood's faith and the deep joy
Of love and life — our love that blessed our ways
And from it all the radiance of our lives.
Hast thy God given thee fuller joys than these ?
That made the dear old paths of Mother Earth
Elysium, and all things upon her breast
Of majesty and beauty one with us,
Heart throbbing with them, full of fearless joy
Interpreting their secrets. Now thy heart
On some mirage of other worlds is set —
Some vision the rapt eye of Frenzy sees,
Of cities fabulous that need no sun
For light nor sea rolls on their ghostly coast,
As if the gods despised their handiwork.
Ah, wife ! in the bright zenith of our joy
Birds and green leaves and streams and quiet
nights
Were of us and our love ; but now how changed !
With what indifferent eyes thou walk'st abroad,
As if the soft, rich light of the glad sun,
The tremulous happiness of chirping fields

And populous grasses quivering with delight
Were evil, and this earth a charnel-house,
And love the most accursed thing of all.
What madness is this creed ! that turns to stone,
Medusa-like, the promptings of the heart,
Dwarfing affection and implanting hate
To all the joys of men and praise of gods,
Sweet stories and the revelings of the mind,
Beautiful thoughts and poetry, and words
Fire-winged from men of god-like gifts and speech.
Oh ! if there be a God apart, distinct
From this close, tangible world, ask of your soul
Can this be laud acceptable to him,
To hold him as the sleuth-hound on the path
Of his creation, placing round their souls
Delight and hope of color, sound, and odor,
Love and bright fancies woven in the life,
And to the vibrant soul whose chords respond
To unseen spiritual touches from their depths,
Rending it as a culprit. If 't were so
Better the full womb should abort its fruit,
And all sweet prattling babes and love's fond hopes,
And nature and the monstrous universe
By some inchoate force be hurled again
To chaos and illimitable death.

Julia.

Do I not love thee ? Night and day my prayers,
With fastings of my body and strong tears

Drawn from my heart, attest to God the love
I bear thee and my deep and earnest cry
For thy enlightenment. Oh ! who can know
Travail of soul like mine — the thorny road,
The darkness of the path with bleeding feet
I trod though shrinking impotently, drawn
As one whom winds and waves have made a prey,
And forced to an unreckoned consummation
Before I found this peace ineffable?
How can I tell thee ? How can I describe
To thee whose soul has never felt alarm,
Nor seen how o'er th' uncertain path of life
The hounds of sin and hell hunt down the soul,
The doom beyond reversal of all flesh
That dares to stand before the righteous throne
Of Infinite Holiness in its own name?
I know not how it slipped o'er my own soul,
Horror and fear, and consciousness of sin,
And the appalling vision of the Just
In whose perfection sin or aught of ill
Abides not, as in some terrific fire
The embers are consumed till naught remains ;
But that clear revelation to my soul
Seized it beyond the sophist's peradventure —
Oh, strong like truth or griping like despair —
And all of earth, all helps of books and men,
All pleasures, hopes, ambitions of the past
Forsook me as one stepping in quicksand
Feels the earth reel and sink beneath his feet,

And heaven above brass, and the lights of skies
Mocking, and nature leagued against his weal,
And life a drop in th' ocean eternity,
And all life's hopes and joys and pride but this,—
As one who, sentenced to be crucified
To-morrow, should spend all to-day in play,
Gambling, and worried if he lost the game,
Or making plans to build him a new house,
Or any madcap thought or freak, so death
Dwarfs all our human grandeur ; makes men's joys
Madness, when the dread after fate is known —
Tomes, pictures, pleasures — Oh, if one had drunk
Hemlock inadvertently, how mad
To loiter on the pathway to the leech
Admiring some rapt butterfly poised o'er flowers !
So when I felt my spirit's bonds to sin,
God's purity, and in me my dread soul
Deathless, with hell or heaven for its place,
I had no thought but to escape my doom ;
Yet all my spirit too was mutinous,
And every moral fiber in me rose
'Gainst Christ, and battled strenuously his claims,
With sinister voices too against God's ways,
Sad, crass debating wearisome to myself,
Of sin, foreknowledge, and of his elect,
For whom my unregenerate heart felt hate ;
But grisly death and lurid flames of hell
Flamed nearer, peering in upon my soul
With raucous echoes of their blasphemies,

And drove me in an agony of fear,
Hatred, despair, and broken heart for sin
At Christ's feet, where, like some wild animal
Held firmly in the victor's net, I struggled —
Struggled against God's strong compelling love,
Struggled against the pleading eyes of Christ —
Until one moment when my heart was changed,
And love flowed in, and Christ was all in all,
With sin and fear and unbelief behind,
And holiness and hope, eternal hope,
God's love and final triumph over sin,
And peace before, around, within, above.
What marvel from my soul's life history then,
I worship Christ, who died to purchase me.

Gallus.

I worship Jove, Mars, Venus, all the gods
And goddesses, the piety of Rome,
Our ancestors and fathers gave a name —
Gods of the hills, the valleys, and the streams,
The breathing hollows and the listening air,
Woods and the mighty blue, o'er-arching heavens.
Oh, serve the thorn-crowned specter of the Cross
If it beseech religion unto thee,
But why not reverence too the other gods?

Julia.

The Triune God is God of gods, whose word
Spake into being the cycling universe,
Which from him throned in inaccessible sheen,

Borrows light and heat and every motive power,
And will not give his glory to thy gods.

Gallus.

What then? If I kneel down to other names,
Calling him Jove; the Zeus of the Greeks —
Seers of the pestilent circumcised say Jahveh —
Although their herd of trembling followers
Forbear to speak th' Incommunicable Name;
Thou call'st him Jesus — is he less a god
Or shorn divinity if thou shouldst homage
The gods or incense the imperial statue?

Julia.

Oh, tempt me not! in vain it is to ask.

Gallus.

If I praise Pan on reeds and with sweet savors,
For ewes that bring forth safely; if I pray
Pomona for the fullness of the year,
Red apples and huge grapes that look in the sun
Bursting with blood for fatness; if of Neptune
I crave safe passage o'er the rutilant foam,
And thy God only has the power to hear,
Shall my sobbed prayer die fruitless in my heart
Because directed wrong? Nay, rather hold
The heart being right, this strife of names and
honors
The God of gods smiles at, and hears alike
The grateful soul that prays to Jove or Jesus.

Julia.

The blind guide his blind follower leads astray,
And both fall in the ditch and are destroyed.

Gallus.

Art thou aware thy danger? Art aware
What punishment the Emperor's edict
Metes to this pestilence? That I too stand
In this same penalty if I harbor thee?
Bethink again — burn incense unto Cæsar,
Or sacrifice to all the living gods.

Julia.

Great Cæsar holds his power but by permission,
And could not stretch his arm forth o'er a saint
Unless God willed it.

Gallus.

Oh ! but spare thyself !
Think of the shame, the agony, the death !

Julia.

Earth's agonies have but a temporal pang,
But after death to souls that slip from God
There is eternal bale. Oh, fear this more,
And Christ will dull the fangs of wolfish men !

During this conversation Vistillia has returned with several male revelers. At this point they discover themselves, seizing Julia, and restraining Gallus, who essays to shield her.

First Reveler.

Hale this blasphemer to the magistrate.

Second Reveler.

Nay, Gallus, is this like thy piety?
The gods will reap great honor in her death,
And thou great blessing.

Gallus.

Good friends, let me die;
My heart is dead already.

A Priest.

No — long years
Winged with ripe blessings now are imminent
To one who has served the gods as faithfully
As Gallus has. Oh, crown a noble life
By cheerfully surrendering unto them
Their enemy, and surely therefore thine;
And haply if thy heart with hers is linked
That its divorce were death, the pitying gods
Who heard Pygmalion's prayer will grant repentance
Unto thy erring wife.

First Reveler (to his neighbor).

Ah, desperate hope!
These Christians die with wondrous obstinacy.

Second Reveler.

Deluded fools! they dream of golden streets
In some eternal city of the saints,

Domes of clear emerald, chrysoprase and pearl,
Crystalline rivers and immortal fruits,
Delicious more than the Hesperides,
Rewards of martyrdom.

Third Reveler.

'T is marvelous !

The other day a boy of fifteen years,
Mad through this sect, left father, mother, friends,
And sat on blistering chairs as though on flowers,
Braved scourge and tongs, and still sang hymns to
Christ,
And in the very teeth of seething fire
That hissed ensanguined by his copious blood
Refused to worship Cæsar, and so died
Adoring Christ.

Second Reveler.

Rivers of blood have flown,
And yet this noxious sect makes headway still,
As though Christ could depose th' immortal gods
As old gray Saturn was o'erthrown by Jove.

*The priests form in line, approach, and sing
in succession.*

First Priest.

Do they dream that the gods
We have worshipped for years
Are as grass of the sods
That the harvest sun seres ;

That the Christ who was born yesterday
Should conquer, depose them, and slay ?

Second Priest.

Could the Man who in terror
Cried out on the Cross,
Convinced of his error,
To a God who ne'er was —
Could he guide Neptune's chariot or run,
And bridle the steeds of the sun?

Third Priest.

Our fathers have told,
In the years that are past,
Of the man over bold
Who would fondly be classed
With the god of the sun ; and his doom
Was worse than Christ's Cross and his tomb.

Fourth Priest.

Would they have us forsake
Gods of life and the grave,
For the Corpse on the stake
Who himself could not save ?
Would they have us bow down knee and head
To a crucified body and dead ?

Fifth Priest.

Oh, what succor could be
To the soul that lifts hand
Unto eyes that nor see
Nor can e'er understand ?

Oh, what answer to suppliant breath
That prays to the stopped ears of Death ?

Sixth Priest.

Could this shadow, this shade,
Of a Being that was
From the tomb where he laid
When torn down from the Cross —
Could he cast off his grave-clothes, and wait
Where the gods sit in glory and state,
They would laugh, they would scorn
This scarred specter of clay,
Who thus mangled and torn
Would be even as they ;
With the marks of the nail and the spear,
He would wither and die in new fear.

Julia.

O blind and unwise !
In the dark web of Fate,
Ye shall open your eyes,
But alas, all too late !
Your palms itch for blood,
And your feet run to death ;
Like a venomous bud
Is the word of your breath.
I know that before me
The path is of pain,
But the pangs to flow o'er me
Will rend me in vain.

For Christ the Eternal
Will clothe me with power,
And the sorrows I mourn all
Will die in an hour.
But when Death springs to sever
Earth's last prop and thee,
O skeptic, forever
Thy torment will be !

Priest.

They nailed Christ to the Tree —
Had he strength to come down ?
In his side was a spear,
On his head a mock crown.
He cried out with fear —
What hope then for thee ?

Julia.

Ere ever the sea had its currents,
Or the mountains sat firm on their base,
Or the day had the sun for its guardian,
Or the stars had their torches and place,
From the infinite hoar everlasting
The eternal sure purpose outran
That God the Creator should ransom
The sins of the creature man ;
And so like a bird o'er its nestlings,
With wide-hovering wings stretched abroad,
Was love brooding o'er the abysm,
Even love from the full heart of God.

And so from the very beginning,
In the regions beneath and above,
Love fondled the scarred hands of suffering,
And Mercy was twin-born with Love ;
Whence down the long vista of ages,
By prophecy, ritual, and type,
The message was sung of His advent
Who should come when his season was ripe.
O world-wide, expectant tradition,
Since ever the race began,
Of a God who should come down from heaven
In the flesh and the form of a man.

For the seed the Creator had planted
Had borne him a monstrous fruit,
And accurséd blossoms were grafted
Upon an impeccable root.
In outbreking sin and rebellion
In blasphemy, venom, and hate
Were the race whom the Lord had created
And blessed in an innocent state ;
And the Lord looked down from his dwelling,
And who to his holy throne
For the race could make expiation
Or e'en for his own sins atone ?
None save an immaculate Being
Of infinite value and worth,
That owed not a creature's allegiance,
Could ransom the sin-cursed earth.

Oh, only a God could offer
 A sacrifice so complete
 That Law still could triumph in heaven
 Yet Justice and Mercy meet ;
 That evil should still be punished,
 Yet the sinner be pardoned by law,
 And the serfdom of sin be broken,
 And the kingdom of God without flaw.

Christ descended from heaven
 To die for his own ;
 His sufferings atone
 For the sins of his people, his elect are forgiven ;
 By the nail-print, the thorn-crown, the blood-
 shed, the thrust
 Of the spear, are all shriven
 The sinners repentant who in them put trust.

Priest.

Away ! we will not hear this blasphemy.
 Convey her to the magistrate.

*Julia is removed, and Priest addresses
 Chorus :*

What saith the god that spoke through thee to this ?

Chorus.

The vision is confused — it is not time.

Priest.

Canst thou see nothing ? is she not foredoomed ?

Chorus.

I see and see not — though strange specters rise,
They chase confusedly before my sight.
Like clouds that break before th' advancing moon,
And roll fantastically over heaven.

Gallus.

I have served all the gods from my youth even up
to my present age ;
Let all men look to me now and see how the gods
give wage.
I have given them threefold service — the joy of my
youth and my health,
The strength of my heart that was fresh, and my
mind, and the tithe of my wealth ;
Oblations on numberless altars — where'er men
erected a shrine,
To gods of all nations and seasons, with offerings
of others, were mine ;
My house was a temple of worship, of incense, of
prayer, and of praise,
To the gods whom we reverence and cherish I
offered the hopes of my days ;
But, oh ! they are jealous and cruel ; their service
is bitter as death,
As an arrow shot into the heart is, or as hemlock is
to the breath.
The gods they are mighty in power, they are brave
and heroic in strife,

They quaff inconceivable depths and immeasurable pleasures of life ;

But services past they forget, as an eaten fig cast out of date,

The past they remember alone to sharpen the edge of their hate.

Of hatred and glory, and pleasure and power, the gods have above,

But they know not to pity — O pitiless gods ! and they know not to love.

I would I had died ere this day. O ye gods ! that the white-shafted spear

Of lightning had pierced through my heart-strings — the death that men reverence and fear ;

In the regions of shadows, where shadows had counted me smit of their rods,

I had known myself that the gods were pitiful, merciful gods.

But now to what place can I go ? or what brightness of day-spring can dawn,

When she who made home for me heaven, and day a bright sunshine, is gone ?

I speak in the bitterness, yea, of my soul — in the blight of my heart :

Are the gods a delusion and snare ? do they mock us and jeer us who smart ?

Did they know of the dove that I fed from my lips and kept warm in my breast,

That a hawk would swoop down from the bright sky and rifle my nest ?

And lapped in Olympian ease did they watch it
with hands all supine
And see the bloody beak seize on the white-wingéd
treasure of mine ?
For well the gods knew that in heart she is pure as
the bud of a flower,
Though the dust of a passing wind wafting may
sprinkle it o'er in its bower,
But the odorous blossom unfolding sifts the dust
from the opening bud —
O pitiless, pitiless gods, is there joy in the scenting
of blood ?

Priest.

Pitiful are the gods, nor fond of blood,
Loving, nor send Affliction's ravening beak ;
But lingering near are Mercy's spread-wings hover-
ing,
Ready, like mother-birds, for swift descent.
'T is not for us to know the gods' designs,
But when they smite to bless them even then.
Thee without doubt the gods forgive hard thoughts,
Dread, rash, and unpremeditated words
Wrung from thee by despair, and doubtless too
Blessing shall blossom yet upon thy life,
More sweet for present sorrow and distress.

Gallus.

Ah, how now can they bless me ? Hear once more.
Spring morning breaking over eastern hills

In quietness and beauty is not sweeter
To hearts that cowered beneath the thunderous
 storm,
When winds have writhed like wrestlers with the
 trees,
Uptorn foundations, and drenched flooded homes,—
The first sweet morn of peace is not more fair
To such, I say, than was her smile to me,
Nor the green cape of home that shines through
 mist
And purple distance like a beckoning god
To weary sailors buffeted by seas
Contrary and long driven by stormy gales,
A sight more loved and longed for than the home
She made for me these three years past. O gods !
Where shall I find a being now like her ?
Who trust, or where give love if in long years
Grief shall grieve grief away as lawless fires,
Flapping their wings of flame, bring fiercer heat
And so consume themselves — to whom give love
If e'er my heart shall grow another spring,
Or trust what prophecy, or e'er again
Give laud and offering to th' unaiding gods,
When thus one worthy of all trust and love,
One prophecy the most divinely good,
One woman faultless in the years now fled,
Beyond all others loved of men or gods,
Ends in such burning — acid-like to bone
And broken heart and ruined life of love,

Cold hearthstone and dismembered wreck of home?
But, friends, forgive me ! grief is garrulous;
I will depart, and let no word of mine
Weigh heavy on your souls. The gods are wise —
Doubtless the gods are wise, and 'tis your wisdom
To serve and please them — these are my last
words.

What else you've heard, pray pardon me — my
grief

Hath changed my spirit so I have forgotten
To speak like my own self. Dear friends, farewell.

*He leaves, proceeding down the path that
leads to his own house.*

First Priestess.

With an audible sound to my ear,
As the rushing of birds of ill-omen to feast on their
prey,
The gods lift the curtain, and clear
I see a perspicuous ray.
He hath spoken — e'en now hath he gone
To his doom,
And the wrath of the gods that have tracked him
e'er since he was born
Now hurry him on to his tomb.

Second Priestess.

Men do an evil thing
In the hasty, ardent spring

Of their life, and they die,
And they leave a glorious fame
And their wealth and their name
To their children, and their house
Is uplifted proud and high,
And the laurel crowns their brows,
And they feast and they marry,
And they take and give spouse
With the mighty and the great,
And in luxury long they carry
Their station in the state.
'T is an honor to be born
From the loins of their race,
Whose descendants joy to trace
The founder of their dawn.
But alas, and alas !
For the fate that comes to pass,
For the gods remember ever
The hero's sins, that never
Had a lustral sacrifice
Offered to them for his vice,
And in fulness of the times
Lo ! the unforgetting gods
Smite his house with their rods,
And his latest generations for his crimes.

Chorus of Priestesses.

The house is built upon sin
And now doth judgment begin.

The gods shall requite on his head
His own sins surely, and even the sins of the dead.
Hence the wife of his heart
From the gods doth depart,
And to her whom he loved and betrayed
A bitter revenge is given,
And in that she lusted for vengeance 't is made
Her punishment too by heaven.

*Near the entrance of his house Gallus meets
Vistillia, who insists upon the fulfilment of
his promise.*

Gallus.

Oh, say it not ! I'll hear no more of this.
Thou wouldst wreath myrtle on a sarcophagus.

Vistillia.

Thy promise — shall my love be still disdained ?

Gallus.

My promise — ah, Vistillia, dost thou know
I love my wife now more than e'er before.
Where'er I turn I see her loving eye
Shining, and like a ghost of Pleasure dead
Her form glides by me, passing and repassing ;
Her lustrous hair and the unnamable grace
That sat on her white brow are e'er before me.
If I should mate again my soul would dream
Of her I loved more fondly, and awaking

To find another lying in her place
My hand were apt to throttle her in sleep.

Vistillia.

Thy wife was recreant to the gods and thee.

Gallus.

If thou lovest life and length of days and limbs
Marred not, then never let thy lips again
Frame words nor let thy thoughts run in such
 groove

As on thy undissembling face may show
Casting a shadow over her white name,
To me no recreant, and th' omnipotent gods,
Let them urge their own cause. I do repent
That ever I was privy to her faith,
And so the sure means of her certain death.
This is the worst curse that the gods pronounce,
That death should seal the lips of injured love
Before they have absolved the injurer.
Hell hath no sharper polished barb of hate
Than this.

Vistillia.

In me behold the human cause,
And it became me, for she was my rival.
But come, now play the man. The gods, not you,
In their eternal purpose planned events,
Making the womb of Time big with results.
The deed predestined, who can thwart the gods?

If I had cause to slay, no weak remorse
Should haunt me like a coward, nor stay my hand.

Gallus (in sudden frenzy).

It shall not me,
And let the gods stand sponsor for it, too !

(Stabs her.)

(After Pause). And by the same red channel let
me float
Out on the sanguinary seas of Death.

*(Stabs himself.) Several of the assembly
hasten to the scene of the tragedy.*

First Arrival.

Is he dead ?

Second Arrival.

Quite dead — no echo of the heart remains.
Vistillia, too, to that dread bourn hath gone.

First Arrival.

Aye, what despair is here ! Believe me, sir,
Some sudden madness seized his brain and heart,
Driving his hand to deeds unlike himself.

Chief Priest.

This is the sleep we fear, and all things fear —
Man lordliest and the animals in all ranks,
The kingliest lions and the shivering mouse,
Creatures that fly through limitless wastes of air

Seeing the sun with wide unwinking eyes,
And myriad hosts of fragile beautiful wings
Noiseless as flakes of snow or sap in leaves,
Monsters in the deep seas and tiny fins —
All fear the reign of Death, and yet our friend
Prematurely sought it — rashly brave,
Calling for Death ere Death had called for him,
Yet chancing that which many great men had done,
Whether for good or ill who knows? Perchance
This fate of righteous men and vile alike,
Death, of itself is neither bad nor good —
Neutral ; but in the kingdom of the dead
The after fate may make it bad or good.
So shall I fondly hope when Death's cry comes
Me-ward from out the darkness of the grave,
That in it there shall still be the same gods,
With the same laws of righteousness and love
For men of clean white souls and crystal thoughts ;
And so I trust not cowardly to die,
But as a son in conscious rectitude,
Ready to meet whate'er the gods decree
Serene and without fear ; but oh, the change
From living flesh through loathsomeness to dust,
Which though concealed by pregnant sods that
hear

The whispering winds of spring and feel warm rain,
White shafts of sunlight and cool mouths of dews
Robing in grass and leaf and fragrant flower
The place of burial, yet I firmly know

Beneath are lips that Love, that once clung close
Vibrating with passionate kisses and desire,
As humming-birds bill deep in hearts of flowers —
That Love would flee in horror and disgust
Fair eyes and splendid hair once loved and fondled,
More sickening now than smoothing serpent skins,
Foulness in ears that drank Love's oaths, and arms
And members all dismembered and decayed
White hands and thighs and the warm musk-like
breasts

Whereon Love pillowed — these are spoils of Death,
Who recks not tender babe nor reverent head.
And I, an orphan and unknown of kin,
For which I thank the gods, and without wife
(Spouseless and childless I shall go to death),
Cheating stern Death of so much dread and sorrow,
For all these ties of love and joys of home
Make Death a greater terror, yet myself
Mourn this man here, whom well I knew; and
mourn

Choice converse and that mutual help and cheer
Congenial souls and righteous friends impart,
Which I from him received, and so to me
Earth is that much less lovely. O bright sun
And shining stars, and thou sun-gilded cloud
Floating like happiness so fleet, so high,
How pitiless the beauty of ye all!
Though men's hearts break, and tears and shudder-
ing sobs

Of human sorrow bow the race to earth,
Ye care not, but shine yet more glorious
As if to mock the griefs of petty souls
With your eternal ray ; and even the flowers
And grasses wet with blood, the evening dews
Will wash the stain away, and the glad morn
Shine on them fresh and beautiful again,
As if there were no sorrow in the world.
So ere man's foot yet trod the infant globe
It was, and so when the last man hath gone
To the dark kingdoms of the nether world
The sun will rise as glorious, and the moon
As softly, and the flowery fields of earth
Swing censers filled with incense to the gods
Forgetful of their broken plaything — man !

Another Priest (sings).

Of friends most fondly cherished
This man in life was chief ;
Belovéd thus and perished,
What song of sad relief
May Love sing o'er his body
With sobbing lips of grief !

When Life and Love and Sorrow
Bow o'er th' unheeding dead,
What tributes can they borrow
From all the past has said ?
Vain tears and vainer memory
Till the same path we tread.

I had by birth no brother,
Yet he was dear, God know'th,
As though a common mother
Had borne and suckled both.
He was my childhood's playmate
And love grew with our growth.

He was my boyhood's hero,
His thoughts were law to me,
A man without a fear, oh,
Grand and true and free !
If others found thee faultful,
Those faults I could not see.

Yet here he lies before you,
Cold hand clasped o'er still breast
That breathed this morning o'er you
Of mortal thoughts the best,
That men should love and worship
And kiss the gods' behest.

For in Life's best completeness,
Where man earth's pathway plods,
In charity and sweetness
He served th' immortal gods,
And died still clean and spotless,
Though smitten by their rods.

Yet setting in affliction
And darkness, none, I wis,
But holds the firm conviction,
Where'er his spirit is
Is sunshine everlasting
And the abode of bliss.

Yet earth to me is darkened,
And day more drear than night;
Bird-songs to which he hearkened
And flowers of his delight,
Lush grass and glassy streamlets
Have power to hurt and smite.

For every thought of Nature
He loved with heart sincere,
Each leaf and bud and creature
To him alike was dear.
I saw them with his eyesight
And heard them with his ear.

How can the gods requite me
For such a loss as this?
What friendship can delight me
Unshared by clasp of his?
And is there love and clasping
Hands where now he is?

And when I shall go to him
Through dread, drear ways of Death,
Will he be as I knew him
Whom no flesh compasseth ?
Are ties that bind men earthward
Ensnapped as they lose breath ?

Farewell, true-hearted lover !
This fate at least was thine —
No long years shall discover
Mortality's dread sign,
A ruinous body living,
A wandering mind supine.

But if through years of duty
The gods prolong my day,
Immortal youth and beauty,
Thou shalt to Memory's ray
Recur as one untarnished
By age or earth's decay.

Chorus of Priestesses.

First Priestess.

The gods rule the earth
Giving peace, giving strife,
And the blast of their breath
Is the time of man's birth ;
And the term of his life,
And the hour of his death,

And the deeds of the hand,
 And the thought of the brain,
 And the hopes of a man,
 As the gods may command
 Are achieved or are vain
 As accords with their plan ;
 For with pleasure or woe,
 Or with glory or shame,
 Or with weakness or might,
 Unto every man so
 As the gods may forename
 Shall the path of his life be in darkness or light.

Second Priestess.

With man is the planting of seed,
 But the gods all the harvesting send ;
 With man the intent and the deed,
 With the gods the result and the end ;
 With man is the bow and the string,
 And the arrow that darts from the bow,
 But the gods guard the power of its wing
 And give it direction to go.
 For good or for ill it may be,
 For a crown or deserving of rods,
 But the fate every mortal will see
 Is foreknown and foredoomed of the gods.
 And Pain is the shadow of Pleasure,
 And Sorrow the specter of Joy,
 And Shame but a different measure
 Of Glory the gods would destroy.

Chorus of Priestesses.

Till the scene-shifting curtain is drawn,
 Till the last sun sets over the stage,
 Who can tell if the man that is born
 Should exult or be sad of his age?
 Rejoice not in greatness and glory,
 Nor in wealth nor in station depend —
 Thou knowest not Life's finished story
 Nor see'st how the morrow shall end.
 And ever to those who are highest
 The deepest reverse may o'ertake,
 As the bird that flies boldest and highest
 The sun may be snared by the snake.
 Then grant us gods' footing and place
 In Life's intermediate state,
 Beyond the base taint of disgrace,
 Beneath the gods' envy or hate!

1888.











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